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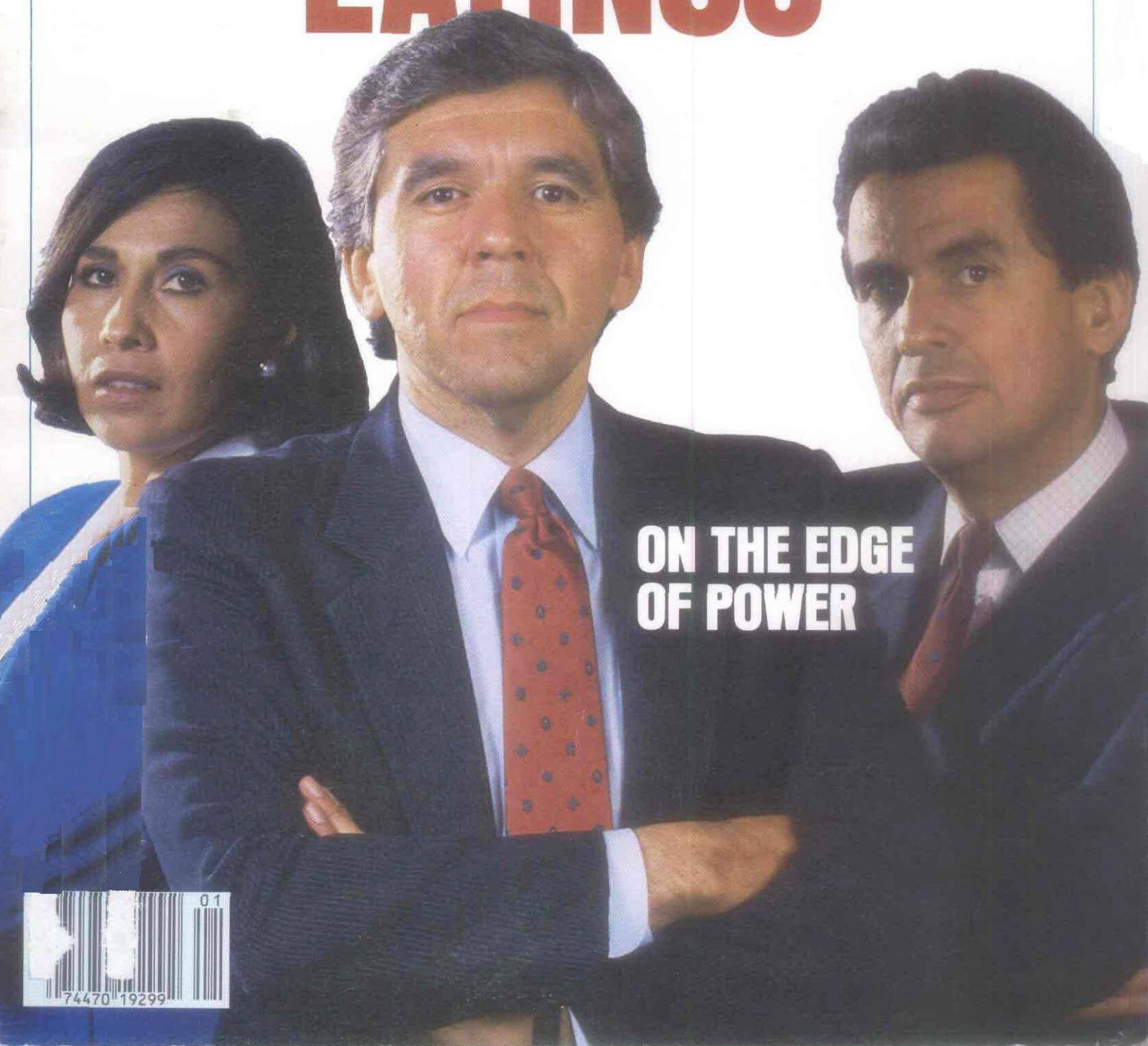
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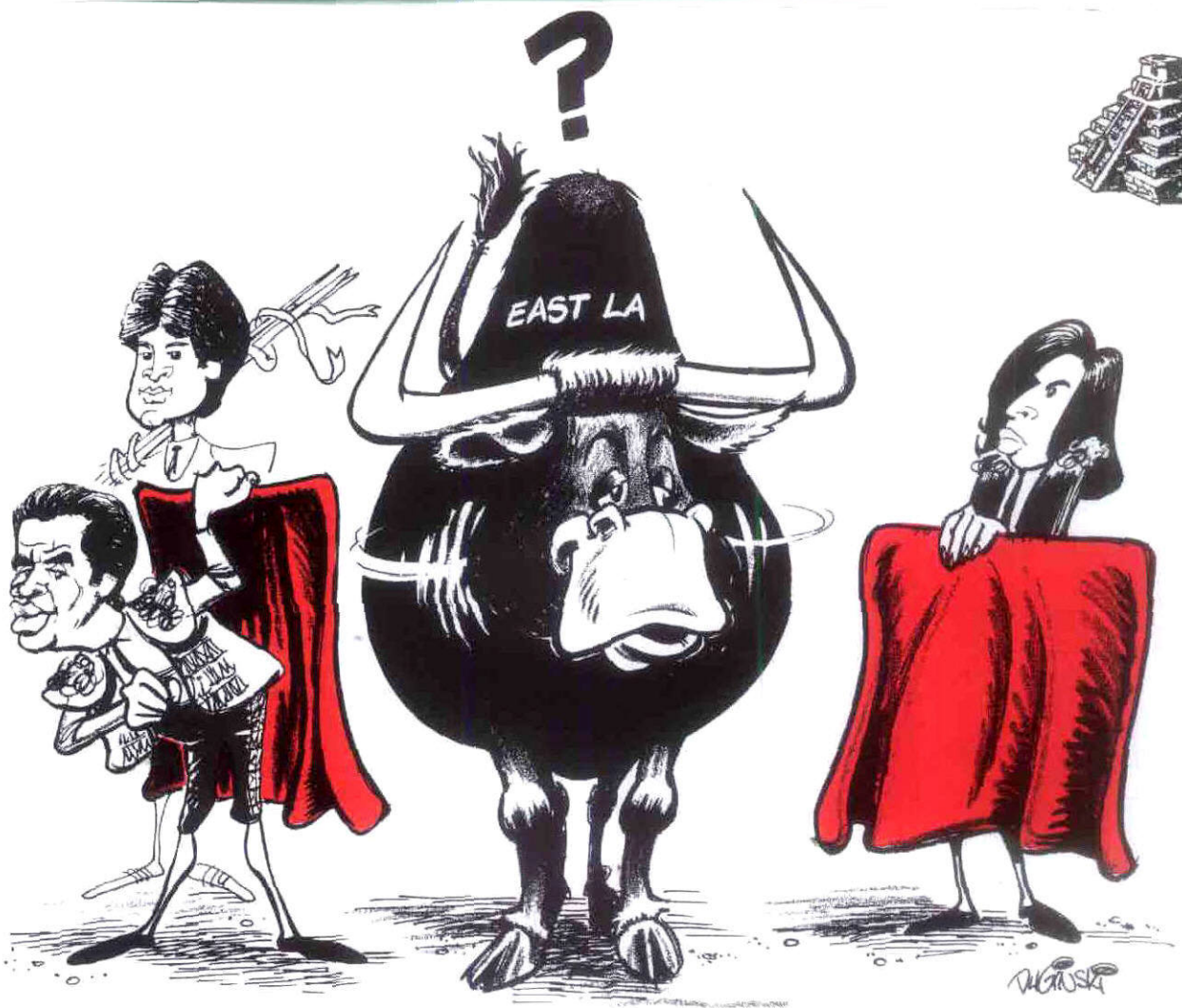
Journal

LATINOS



**ON THE EDGE
OF POWER**





Latino unity stalls in East LA

By RUBEN CASTANEDA

When Assemblyman Richard Polanco voted last June for a plan to put a state prison two miles southeast of the Los Angeles Civic Center in the heart of the Latino barrio, he and Assembly Speaker Willie Brown were sending a message to East Los Angeles Assemblywoman Gloria Molina.

The vote was one episode in an on-going fight for political leadership of Los Angeles' growing Latino community. It pits Molina, with the sometime support of the city's most senior Latino elected official, Congressman Ed Roybal, against Richard Alatorre and state Senator Art Torres.

Molina found herself increasingly isolated from the city's Latino political leadership after she bucked them, and Speaker Brown, by supporting Mike Hernandez against Polanco in last spring's special election primary to fill the 55th Assembly District seat vacated by Richard Alatorre. Alatorre had been elected to the Los Angeles City Council the

previous December. Brown and Polanco denied there were any political considerations to Brown's appointment of Polanco to the Public Safety Committee and Polanco's ensuing vote on the prison site, which is in Molina's district. But sources close to both men said the prison plan was a convenient way to punish Molina for her opposition to Polanco's candidacy.

Most Los Angeles Latino political observers figured Polanco's vote ended the issue, since the prison bill sailed through the Assembly. But in the volatile world of East Los Angeles politics, it is unwise to take anything for granted. Polanco's vote sparked a firestorm of protest by residents and business people who live and work near the proposed prison site. The grassroots opposition to the prison plan was so great that state Senator Art Torres — who had been prepared to concede the construction of the prison in his district — took up the battle against the plan in the Senate.

Torres marshaled the support of Senate President pro Tempore David Roberti and the result was a stand-off between Senate Democrats and Republican Governor George Deukmejian, who called a fruitless special session of the Legislature in an effort to force lawmakers to put the prison into Molina's district.

As the dust kicked up by the political skirmish began set-

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thing, several things became clear: Torres and Molina scored political points with their constituents and other Latinos because of their opposition to the prison; Latinos proved they could go toe-to-toe with the governor and stand their ground; and, perhaps most significant, Los Angeles Latinos, long accustomed to being bulldozed by the powers-that-be, had undergone a dramatic political awakening.

"Now this community feels empowered, whether or not they ultimately win on this issue is immaterial," said Estela Lopez, an aide to Lieutenant Governor Leo McCarthy and a Latino political activist. "What it's done is give the people a feeling, for the first time, that they can be a force." Indeed,

"That's her vendetta, and how she chooses to pursue it is her decision."
— Richard Alatorre

members of the grassroots coalition which fought the prison plan vowed to remain together to work on other issues affecting their community, including three trash-incineration projects slated for the East Side and southeast areas of Los Angeles.

Longtime East Side residents, recalling how Latinos were forced out of their homes in the 1950s and 1960s in favor of freeways and Dodger Stadium, proclaimed the prison battle a turning point for their community. "Now that we know how to fight, no one's going to do this kind of thing to us again," said Irene Meras, a 40-year-old housewife whose mother had been forced from her home three decades ago to make room for the Pomona Freeway.

For the elected officials who were involved in the conflict over the prison, the political fallout was mixed. Torres had originally voted for the East Side prison site, but in response to community outcry, he spearheaded the Senate opposition. As a result, he appears to have strengthened his support among grassroots Latinos. For Molina, the situation is more complex and may be a factor in her candidacy for a vacant seat on the Los Angeles City Council.

Molina's alienation

Even as she teamed with Torres to fight the prison proposal, Molina was preparing to campaign for the council seat against Los Angeles School Board member Larry Gonzalez, a former aide to Torres, who has the support of Torres and Alatorre. The council seat is one that was created in response to a federal lawsuit charging that the Los Angeles City Council had historically gerrymandered to restrict the number of seats that might be won by Latinos.

On the surface, Molina's role in fighting the prison plan would appear to strengthen her considerably with the Latino voters, and indeed she has scored points with her constituents. But Molina's past actions have alienated her from the increasingly powerful Los Angeles Latino political infrastructure that includes Alatorre, Torres and even Latino feminists, to whom Molina was at one time a heroine for being

the first Latina elected to the state Legislature.

Ironically, while Molina is not currently part of the Torres-Alatorre alliance, and takes great pride in pointing out her independence, she came up through their ranks much like Gonzalez, Polanco and others. Molina worked as an aide for Torres in the 1970s and was the top Southern California aide to Speaker Brown in 1982 when she ran against Polanco. In between, Molina was appointed — on the recommendation of Lou Moret, one of Alatorre's closest confidants — to a personnel department post in Jimmy Carter's White House. That job led to a stint as deputy director of the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Molina grew up in a large Mexican-American family in Pico Rivera, a suburb about 10 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. She first became involved with East Side politics when she worked on Art Torres' Assembly campaign in 1974, and impressed Moret who suggested Torres hire her.

But her break with Torres and Alatorre became complete last spring with Polanco's candidacy for the Assembly. The episode demonstrates how long-time personal and political relationships and long-standing animosities — set against a background of increasing opportunities for Latino politicians — combine to make politics on the East Side of Los Angeles always lively and sometimes nasty as Los Angeles Latinos attempt to claim more power.

In December 1985, Latino politicians began jockeying for position in the special election to fill the 55th Assembly District seat vacated by Alatorre. For a few weeks it looked as though there would be a showdown between Gonzalez, who would be backed by his former boss Torres, and Polanco, who would be supported by Alatorre, to whom Polanco had been a top aide. After a series of meetings between Torres and Alatorre, and several other gatherings involving their supporters, Gonzalez agreed to bow out, clearing the way — apparently — for Polanco to walk into the seat, which has a 68 percent Democratic registration. Gonzalez won points with Alatorre and his lieutenants for being a "team player"

"I didn't come here to fit into a mold that anybody created for me."
— Gloria Molina

who was willing to put his ambitions on hold to avoid internecine war.

However, Molina came out in support of Hernandez against Polanco, giving credibility to Hernandez' campaign. She acknowledged publicly that she was motivated partly because of her personal dislike for Polanco whom she had defeated in the bitterly contested 1982 Assembly primary. Molina's decision angered many Latino politicians and seriously damaged a few long-time friendships and political alliances. She was seen by Polanco's supporters — who included most of the local Latino political leadership — as an unnecessarily divisive force since Polanco and Hernandez



differed little politically or philosophically. "That's her vendetta, and how she chooses to pursue it is her decision," said Torres, one of Molina's strongest supporters in the past. "I don't understand it, and I never will."

Alatorre

The 43-year-old Alatorre is rapidly becoming one of the best-known Latino political officials in Los Angeles. After spending 13 years in the state Legislature, where he became a top lieutenant to Speaker Brown and was charged with the politically delicate job of designing state legislative and congressional districts, Alatorre decided to switch to the Los Angeles council. Not only is the salary better, but the television exposure is greater for an ambitious man who makes little secret of his desire to become mayor of the state's largest city.

Ironically, Alatorre's split with Molina occurred just a few months after he successfully helped a friend of Molina's get appointed to the Los Angeles Community College District board — in part to strengthen his ties to Molina and Latino feminists. In engineering the appointment of Leticia Quezada, who had once picketed his field office over the issue of reapportionment, Alatorre hoped to cement the link between himself and Molina, who had never forgotten that he supported Polanco against her in 1982.

For her part, Molina has stuck to her guns, defending her support of Hernandez and pointing to Polanco's committee vote as proof he is willing to "sell out" his community for political purposes. She said she's not worried by suggestions by Alatorre and his supporters that she is isolating herself from most of the Los Angeles Latino political leadership. "I'm sure it might be in their interest (to suggest she's an isolationist), but I'm not going to dwell on it," she said. "I've got things that I'm doing within my district, and I have my own relationships with my own people who I think are significant and important, not only in the district, but throughout the state."

But there is no question that the skirmish over Polanco-Hernandez has cost her valuable support among long-time allies. Among those who split with Molina over the Polanco campaign were Quezada and Sandra Serrano-Sewell, a political activist who helped spearhead Molina's 1982 campaign and who now heads Alatorre's finance committee. Even though Molina is godmother to one of Serrano-Sewell's children, she and Molina have not spoken since they parted over the Polanco campaign in early 1986, and Molina and Quezada have also not spoken in many months. Quezada and Serrano-Sewell — who in 1985 urged Molina to run for the highly-visible city council seat Alatorre won — will be supporting Gonzalez against Molina. Quezada and Serrano-Sewell have even formed a group of Latino women — which conspicuously does not include Molina — to discuss how to promote Latina candidates and issues, an area they feel Molina has neglected. The group also includes Carmen Luna, a former Molina aide; Mary Duron, a Los Angeles banking official; McCarthy aide Lopez; and Carmen Perez, a Democratic Party activist. Most or all of these women are expected to support Gonzalez or stay neutral, eliminating much of Molina's past campaign core.

Alatorre himself has downplayed the feud, saying similar conflicts occur between other minorities and between whites but receive less attention. "Look at what's happening with the blacks. Everyone's running for the (vacant) 10th district seat (on the Los Angeles council), but no one says that they're at war." However, the councilman did make it clear that Molina has hurt herself with the East Side political leadership, adding that he's not sure she understood the ramifications of her supporting Hernandez. "She believes that good and justice will always prevail (on specific issues). But when you isolate yourself from people you need, you can't expect them to turn about and help you when you need them."

Molina, however, said her opposition to Polanco was based solely on what she thought was good for the community — the standard by which she says she makes all of her decisions. As for the larger feud, Molina said she believes much of the conflict arises from the fact she concentrates on specific issues and does not belong to what she calls the "old boy network." "I know there's probably a feeling that I'm being stand-offish in a sense, and I'm not. Sometimes I don't feel I fit in. I'm not comfortable necessarily . . . with the whole idea of camaraderie — not that there's been any great outreach to include me."

"I didn't come here (to Sacramento) to fit into a mold that



Polanco

anybody created for me, and I don't expect I'm going to leave in one," she said.

Regardless of who wins the battle, the presence of another Latino on the city council is all but assured, and there is talk of another one in the future out of a new San Fernando Valley district, also the result of redistricting, that has a Latino population of about 40 percent.

A bright future

"I think the future is very bright," Torres said. "I think the only thing that would stop us would be a failure to work hard. Every time I go to the college campuses around the state, I'm excited about the number of Hispanics who want to go into public policy-making." Torres, the most polished of the Latino elected leadership, likes to talk in terms of partnerships — between Latinos and other ethnic and minority groups, Latinos and the business community, government and the private sector. By 1990, Torres believes he will have built enough partnerships to make his long-anticipated bid for statewide office, spreading the message that Latinos are no different from anyone else in the state in what they want for their families and themselves — jobs, good schools, safe neighborhoods.

As for Alatorre, his lieutenants say he is preparing to run for mayor whenever Bradley vacates that office. Though Alatorre was tainted by the campaign finance scandal in which he admitted illegally funneling more than \$80,000 into his council campaign and agreed to pay \$141,966 in fines and payments to avoid civil proceedings against three of his campaign workers, he appears to have weathered the episode without suffering serious political damage. Alatorre also won points for being the chief architect of the city council's redistricting plan that resulted in a new Latino seat. Alatorre is reluctant to speak publicly about his mayoral aspirations, but it is clear he has high hopes for Latinos in the City of Angels. "The city council has changed dramatically in the last year, and you're going to see more changes," he said. His goal, he said, is to reach the point where "no elected official who wants to do business in the city or county of Los Angeles is going to be able to ignore Hispanics." ■



Gonzalez